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BOOKS

Chabon's second book pleasant; falls short of first

Michael Chabon

A MODEL WORLD and Other Stories by Michael Chabon; William Morrow & Co.; 207 pages; $18.95.

By Karen Knutson
Gazette Staff

Michael Chabon earned extraordinary acclaim for his 1988 debut novel, "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh." This eagerly anticipated follow-up, consisting mostly of stories that appeared in *The New Yorker*, retains Chabon's sense of artistry, but fails to pack the wallop of "Mysteries."

The book is divided into two completely unrelated parts: The first is a series of stories about young men in various stages of love, some funny, some loaded with misery. The second is five linked stories tracing the growth of a young boy named Nathan Shapiro from childhood through his parents' divorce and into adulthood.

Although a common search for the meaning of love weaves through both parts, the transition from the first segment to the second is as abrupt as unexpectedly stepping off a curb.

Chabon, 26, is a craftsman with words, and his talent is evident when it comes to creating masterpiece sentences. But his stories, although witty and well-considered, don't linger in the memory. Like a bland low-calorie snack, "A Model World" will tide you over until the next appetizing book comes along.

Worth biting into is the poignant "Blumenthal on the Air," or what happens when the husband in a marriage of convenience messes up and actually falls in love with his wife.

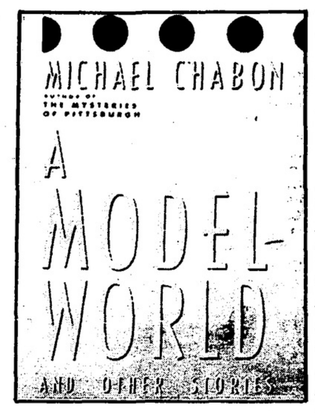
But magnificent Persian Roksana has always been honest about what she wants from their relationship: a green card. Even when he transports her to romantic Paris to kindle her passion, Roksana icily states, "I'm sorry, Brian Blumenthal. I can't do it."

The appealing "S Angel" summarizes the thoughts racing through the head of Ira Wiseman, a handsome young film student, while attending the wedding of his lovely cousin Sheila.

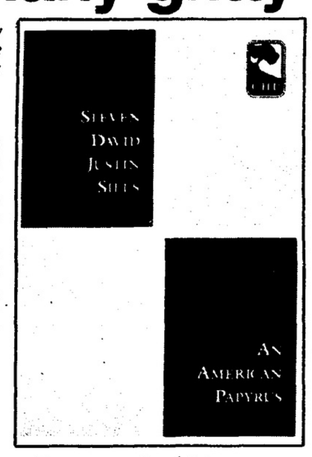
Spiffy in "Italian wool trousers, his silk shirt, his pink socks, to which he imputed a certain sexual felicity, and a slightly worn but still serviceable Willi Smith sport jacket," Ira embarks on a doomed flirtation with an older woman experienced enough to ditch him for what she really needs, a real estate agent.

But the title story, in which a graduate student plagiarizes a dissertation only to find himself and his faculty adviser in a parlor game where each player must confess the worst thing he has ever done, gets muddled in intellectual self-importance.

The reader may find it hard to concentrate on the game, let alone keep the players straight. Maybe if the topic would have been anything other than "Antarctic Models of Induced Nephokinesis," the thesis, and the story, would have been a winner.



'Papyrus' an eloquent ode to life's many gritty moments



AN AMERICAN PAPYRUS by Steven David Justin Sills; The Chestnut Hills Press Poetry Series; 63 pages; $6.95 paperback.

By Amy L. Wilson
Gazette Staff

Twenty-six poems make up this first published book by Steven Sills, 26, of Fayetteville. Sills' vision is often a dark one. He writes of the homeless, the abused, the forgotten people.

He also is intrigued with the mystical, the sensual/sexual, loss — as in losing those whom we hold dear, such as a spouse or lover — as well as *the* lost, such as someone who is autistic, who seems unreachable.

Sills' skillful use of the language to impart the telling moments of a life is his strength. He chooses his words carefully, employing a well-developed vocabulary. He is thoughtful about punctuation, where to break lines and when to make a new stanza.

He's obviously well-versed in "great" literature.

Sills' command of language helps to soften the blows of some of the seamier passages found in his poems.

Seamy may not be the best word to use. Perhaps gritty is a better word. Or just plain matter-of-fact and to the point, as in this descriptive passage from "Oracion A Traves De Gasshole," about the hopeless feelings of a respiratory therapy worker:

With the last of the air drawing in,
Begins to fold its walls; and he could imagine it
Like he could imagine, from unexact memories,
The woman, last night
At the hospital, whom he began to like —
Her body pulling cell by cell
Apart before he had a chance
To finish the rescue with the hose

The book begins with "Post-Annulment 2," a poem with a poignant description of society's displaced — *As the sun blazes upon the terminal's/ Scraped concrete/ The shelved rows of the poor men* — and continues by describing a city scene through the eyes of a maintenance worker at the Hilton Hotel.

The protagonist's wife has left him and he is taking the bus to work that morning, his mind wandering as he looks for the key to why she is gone:

He rings the bell.
The idea of her not home, and legally annulled
From his life — ...
...makes him feel sick. He gets down from the bus.
He goes to work. He suddenly knows that he is not in love.

As many poets will do, Sills could not leave this work alone. So a hybrid of this poem, "Post Annulment" ends the book. In it, he has kept many of the original lines and added parenthetical remarks to expand on his ideas.

It is in this context he allows himself to comment on religion: *Religion is a lie! Everything is a lie!* and on marriage: *Marriage, that sanctified legal rape, fosters/ the child-man to be a destined societal function/ As he grows up in the family unit.*

Not all the poems are so bleak and cynical in every passage, however, as is apparent in "The San Franciscan's Night Meditations": *The night is full of impulses/ To live and to run and seep heavily/ Into its dark robes of/ Silence and morbid rightness.*

People who do not feel comfortable examining in detail the darker side of life — the details that the average person overlooks because it just hurts or feels too strange to look — will not enjoy this book.

Serious writers of free verse, contemporary poetry and/or those who study it will not be disappointed.

Sills, a native of Missouri, is a recent graduate of Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield. He currently is working in Fayetteville.

Sills dedicated his book to Mike Burns, a poet and teacher at SMSU who helped him edit his work.

Heimel's essays offer women sassy good sense about men

IF YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT ME, WHY AREN'T YOU DEAD YET? by Cynthia Heimel; Atlantic Monthly Press; 221 pages; $19.95.

Cynthia Heimel, best-selling author, playwright and columnist for *Vogue, Playboy* and *The Village Voice*, will delight her legion of fans with her latest collection of essays on the human condition.

This sulky yet amusing sequel to "Sex Tips for Girls" and "But Enough About You" is Heimel's "mature" phase, now that she's fortysomething. Beneath the gaiety and sass is the work of a staunch feminist who is self-sufficient but also lonely, angry, soulful and sweet, a woman with many friends and a teen-age son who still longs for a good man. Many of Heimel's pieces involve the quest for a sane, healthy, exciting relationship.

Her advice on finding Mr. Right: do nothing. *If he's the wrong man, you can turn yourself inside out with wiles and perfume and French-maid's outfits and nothing will work. You'll never get him, you'll never keep him, you don't have a chance. If he's the right man, you can have greasy hair, spinach in your teeth and your skirt on inside out and he'll still be entranced and follow you to the ends of the earth. .... You just have to follow your own personal, weird, goofy little star.*

GREAT AMERICAN MYSTERIES
Bigfoot, running snakes, fabled cities of gold, strange disappearances, and other baffling tales.
E. RANDALL FLOYD

In Brief

Italian ice

THE DUST ROADS OF MONFERRATO by Rosetta Loy; Alfred A. Knopf; 249 pages; $20.

From Italy comes a luminous novel that swept all the major literary prizes there and became a best seller. "The Dust Roads of Monferrato" is Rosetta Loy's fascinating account of four generations of a farming family in Piedmont, Italy — a story marked by births, deaths, wars, poverty, tragedy and love.

Yet this is a family chronicle of a different order, for despite its scope, it's told almost without dialogue in a quiet, detached style that carries great conviction.

In shimmering writing that is highly visual, the novel concerns the descendants of "the Great Masten," who made enough money to buy his own land, animals and farmhouse and left it all to his two sons. One is a golden-haired dreamer and musician, the other a fierce practical man, an adventurer in Napoleon's armies who must come home to save the farm from ruin.

This is the first work by Loy, a distinguished Italian novelist, to be translated into English.

First of many

GREAT AMERICAN MYSTERIES by E. Randall Floyd; August House; 190 pages; $18.95 cloth, $9.95 paper.

E. Randall Floyd of Augusta, Ga., author of the syndicated column "Great Southern Mysteries" and two books about unexplained phenomena in the South, has broadened his scope in "Great American Mysteries."

This, the first in a series the author plans to produce over the next few years, contains 38 tales ranging from the notorious to the obscure — legends, unexplained occurrences and puzzles that often are grounded in historical events.

The stories are divided under the headings of Notorious Acts, Standing Stones and Lost Civilizations, Unnatural Worlds, Secrets from Beyond, Every Creeping Thing, In the Midst of Life, Into the Unknown, In the Realm of Spirits and Unearthly Incursions.

Scientifically savvy

SCIENCE MATTERS by Robert M. Hazen and James Trefil; Doubleday; 294 pages; $19.95.

In a world where computer chips continually change the way we work and play, you wonder if people ever feel guilty about having no idea how these tiny pieces of silicon work.

To be a competent citizen, we are told, it is essential to know something about the forces that drive our society.

People who have such understanding are described as scientifically literate, and that literacy is the subject of Robert Hazen and James Trefil's "Science Matters."

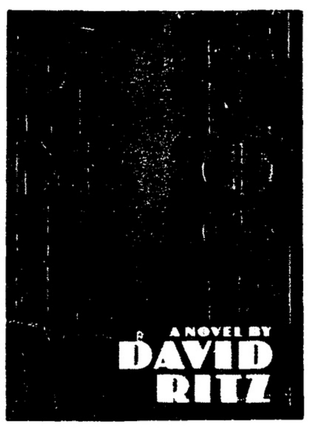
The authors begin by letting some air out of people who may be smug about their own science literacy, and they give encouragement to those who admit to not knowing as much about science as they should.

"Science Matters" breaks down all scientific knowledge into 20 basic statements, such as "The universe is regular and predictable" and "Everything is made of atoms," and then briefly explains the meaning of each idea.

Hazen, an earth scientist, and Trefil, a physicist, are masters at using analogies to demystify challenging concepts such as relativity and quantum mechanics.

"Science Matters" is an excellent introduction to science for the layman and a valuable resource whenever you need to refresh your memory about how computer chips work or what genetic engineering is about. It won't, by itself, correct the problems of America's scientific illiteracy, but it is a laudable first step in the right direction.

Sordid tale hangs together by coincidence, not interest



FAMILY BLOOD by David Ritz; Donald I. Fine, Inc.; 321 pages; $19.95.

By Mark Marymont
Gazette Staff

Wanna buy a coincidence?

Those unable to totally suspend belief when confronted by a truly amazing sequence of cross-generational coincidences would be well advised to leave this one on the shelf.

Ostensibly, this is about the music business. But the sprawling tale of greed, music, murder, mayhem and the long shadows of a couple of evil grandfathers falls flat long before it ever takes off.

Known for interesting biographies of singers like Marvin Gaye and Ray Charles and some not very interesting music business fiction, David Ritz seems to think that dropping real names will make his fiction more readable.

And it might work if he had an interesting tale to tell in the first place.

The story, such as it is, careens back and forth to flashbacks of the good old days in the '50s when a killer named Ruben "the Gent" Ginzburg was working for one Pino Feldman, a gangster even meaner than his brutal underling. Through a series of odd circumstances, Pino, then Ruben get involved in the music business — Pino for the money and Ruben for the love of music.

While Ruben produces some hits and finds a truly gifted singer who becomes his mistress, he also really hates Pino. But Pino pays Ruben a lot of money for being a cold-blooded killer, enabling Ruben, who does love his family, to live a life of ease and dress in the fancy duds that have earned him his sobriquet. And, he gets to produce records.

Flash to the present and the old men are still alive -- barely -- sustained by their mutual hate. Pino, betrayed by Ruben to the Feds years ago, is especially interested in finding his old nemesis and pounding him flatter than a record.

While both men have been away from the Mob for years, they have some amazingly current and lethal contacts in organized crime. Of course, coincidences demand the two meet in one last showdown.

We are also treated to the antics of an Italian actress and her father, who — can you believe it? — seems to be linked to the other important characters through more strange coincidences.

We also meet Ruben's son, now a famous New York attorney so ashamed of his dad the killer he's living under another name. He disavows any knowledge of Dad and would prefer his son, a lawyer who really wants to be in the music business, adopt the same attitude.

And — look, it's another coincidence! — the attorney father has a girlfriend, a high class decorator, truly embarrassed by her parents. Their big sin is being gauche Midwestern rubes.

Other coincidences coincide before the murderous and ultimately unbelievable tale grinds to a halt. By the time all the deeds are done, the hapless reader is so tired of this turgid recounting they are ready to forget the whole thing.

The most likely coincidence of all is that readers will agree this is a stupid book.

Monthly minibooks find a market

By Nicholas K. Geranios
Associated Press

GRANDVIEW, Wash. — "The guy was an Elvis impersonator and his sister was more than a tad worried about his disappearance."

So begins "Dead Ringer," a novel by Greg Mandel that pits a private eye against the killer of Elvis impersonators. Subtitled "A Deep Fat-Fried Mystery," it's the first book published by Randy Byrd's DimeNovels, a Portland, Ore., company seeking to revive the old-fashioned dime novels.

Byrd is betting that readers are ready for the short, fast formula novels that thrived before the dawn of television. DimeNovels plans to publish 12 novels a month and sell them for $1.99 at grocery and convenience stores.

"Dead Ringer" is 96 pages and 20,000 words, the standard DimeNovel format. The small book, the size of a cassette tape, can be read in about two hours.

"There's a market out there of people intimidated by larger books," Byrd said. "They turn to shorter articles in magazines."

DimeNovels has test-marketed a collection of 12 novellas in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Charlotte, N.C., and other sites. WaldenBooks will be testing them in 20 stores. Cost of publishing and marketing the first novels was $250,000.

Littered with shapely gams, heaving bosoms, brawny heroes, interplanetary warfare and walking dead, these books are likely the worst nightmare of the literary purist.

The initial 12 titles include:

■ The horror story "Walk With the Dead," in which a "woman's corpse somehow has moved of its own accord and reasonable explanations are not to be found."

■ The fantasy novel "The Hero Curse," in which a stableboy "is minding his own miserable business in a nameless Talian village when he falls victim to a most unusual curse."

■ "Cowboy's Lady," in which buckaroo Dallas Roscoe "was the one man who had set Jane's heart on fire, a man who had seared her with his kiss, a man who had branded her forever with his love."

■ "Exotic Love," whose hero Charley Parker was "a dangerously handsome man of mysterious lineage and questionable background, a man who would not reveal his true name."

Byrd is currently lining up investors to provide $2 million to nationally launch DimeNovels in August.

Like diet and horoscope books, DimeNovels are designed to be an impulse buy at checkout counters. They are in disposable displays. Each month, stores will toss out any remaining copies — as if they were spoiled fruit or stale bread — and put a new batch on display.

Arkansas Press hands out awards

Jack Hambrick of Elkins, a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, has received the John Ciardi Award for poetry given as part of the University of Arkansas Press' 1991 Literary Awards competition.

Graduate students Dan Smolia of Fayetteville and Kris Kirk of Westville, Okla., share the Charles M. Finger award for short fiction.

Graduate students of Fayetteville also won three nonfiction categories: Patricia A. Commerford (Daisy Bates award), Mike Larson (M. Blair Hart Award) and Jacqueline E. Cason (C. Vann Woodward award). All winners receive an award certificate and $100 worth of Press books.

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